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Myth 13: The Regular Classroom Teacher Can “Go It Alone”

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With most gifted students being educated in a mainstream model of education, the prevailing myth that the regular classroom teacher can “go it alone” and the companion myth that the teacher can provide for the education of gifted students through differentiation are alive and well. In reality, the regular classroom teacher is too often concerned about test scores and thinks the best way to prepare students for the state standardized tests is to teach them test-taking strategies and then conduct work sessions using old state tests as review and practice, concentrating on test format.

Differentiation has been around since the early years of gifted education and was defined and delineated in the Principles of Differentiation by a committee convened by Irving Sato, the Director of the National and State Leadership Training Institute. The group agreed that differentiation included what is taught (content), how it is taught (process), and the outcome (product). Tomlinson (1999) described differentiation as proactive, more qualitative than quantitative, and Sisk (2009) summarized differentiation as changing the pace, level, or type of instruction in response to the gifted student’s needs, learning styles, and interests. Kaplan (2009) said differentiation includes

The who—the learner and his or her needs, interests, and abilities; the what—the content and skills of the subject matter to be taught; the how—the pedagogy to be used to teach the content, skills, or both; and the where—the setting, grouping, or both needed to effectively implement the curriculum (the what) to the learner (the who). (p. 107)

Depth and Complexity Model

Kaplan (2007) developed a practical and “teacher friendly” model to address depth and complexity to alter the content, process, and product elements of

the curriculum. She identified eight strategies to help gifted students build greater understanding: (1) understanding the language of the discipline, (2) learning as many details as possible, (3) realizing that patterns keep reoccurring overtime, (4) being aware of trends and their influences, (5) looking for unanswered questions, (6) being aware of the rules that govern a discipline, (7) understanding the ethics involved in the topic of study, and (8) knowing the big ideas of a discipline. These strategies can be introduced to gifted students in the elementary school, and their usefulness will continue as lifelong strategies. The model matches many of the commonly observed needs and characteristics of gifted students identified by a number of researchers and educators. *Understanding the language of the discipline and Learning as many details as possible* meets the gifted students’ need to build a rich fund of information on a topic and their desire for knowledge. Looking for patterns is a characteristic of gifted students, and focusing on *realizing that patterns keep reoccurring* helps them realize the historical significance of patterns in policy making and interaction between people and countries in a global world. Being aware of trends and their influence matches two characteristics of gifted students, being a keen observer and having the ability to grasp and understand new ideas quickly. Engaging in *looking for unanswered questions* empowers gifted students to function as “practitioners” in the disciplines, and this strategy matches their characteristics of persistent and goal-directed behavior and ability to ask intelligent questions. *Being aware of the rules that govern a discipline* transports gifted students from an “imbiber” to a contributor, and this strategy is a companion to *understanding the ethics involved in a*

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topic of study. Gifted students have a keen sense of right and wrong and “fairness,” and this strategy engages them in dialogue and reflection about not only the actions but also the reactions, such as “Who does this serve or benefit?” and “Who is harmed?” Last, the strategy of *knowing the big ideas of a discipline* will match their abstract thinking and will help gifted students focus on the key concepts in a topic of study.

Other Strategies for Differentiating the Curriculum

Other strategies of differentiating the curriculum include inquiry-based learning and providing choice and options. The opportunity to experience some sense of control of their learning motivates many less than enthusiastic gifted students. When given opportunities to select their preferred process of learning and to choose topics and outcomes, gifted students become willing and eager learners. Another way to differentiate is using tiered assignments and lessons with parallel tasks that the teacher designs to provide for different levels of depth, complexity, and abstractness, as well as different amounts of scaffolding, support, and direction.

Enrichment clusters are still another way to differentiate curriculum in which gifted students become involved in learning that is inductive, self-selected, and investigative. In an enrichment cluster, the teacher’s role is a facilitator, turning the responsibility for creative and investigative activity over to the students (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2007). Teachers can also use compacting, by summarizing and condensing the curriculum, so that the gifted students can move on to more challenging and advanced curriculum.

Does the Regular Classroom Teacher Use These Strategies to Differentiate Curriculum for Gifted Students?

Westberg and Archambault (1997) reported on observations in elementary schools across the country. They found that when teachers had advanced training and staff development, they were more willing to change their traditional teaching. They emphasized the importance of teachers collaborating with other teachers and concluded that when schools have strong, respected, and innovative leaders, teachers’ ideas are valued and supported. Shore, Cornell, Robinson, and

Ward (1991) reported that teachers who received training in the needs of gifted students and appropriate teaching strategies tend to be more supportive of gifted students and programs, and without special training teachers could be described as apathetic and even hostile. Although this research indicates that professional development can change teacher attitudes and behavior, the most recent State of States in Gifted and Talented Education Report found that only 3 of 43 responding states indicated that classroom teachers had more than 3 contact hours in either pre-service or in-service training in gifted education, and at least 19 states do not require any training in gifted education (Sisk, 2008).

The problem with the notion that the regular classroom teacher can go it alone is compounded in that most differentiation, even when it is addressed, focuses on the academic needs of gifted students and overlooks the emotional needs of the gifted. Sisk (2009) suggests helping gifted students understand and accept their intensities, their perfectionism, and their need to seek balance in their lives.

Essential Skills and Attitudes for Teachers in Working With Gifted Students

Project Breakthrough sought to raise teacher expectations in action research. The project reinforced the importance of professional development, and the staff found that when teachers raised their expectations about minority students, the achievement of the students improved as they experienced rich, rigorous curriculum (Swanson, 2006).

Van Tassel-Baska, MacFarlane, and Feng (2008) identified three essential skills for working with the gifted, including the knowledge and effective use of a variety of teaching techniques including differentiation and questioning skills, strong communication skills, and the ability to understand and to address students needs. These skills point to the need for the regular classroom teacher to have professional development to address appropriate teaching techniques and the psychology of the gifted student, as well as strong communication skills.

In summary, the myth of the regular classroom teacher “going it alone” is still with us, along with the companion myth of differentiation as the solution to be implemented by the regular classroom teacher. Without professional development and a willingness to address the individual needs of gifted students in

the curriculum within an “accountability” frenzied environment, it becomes a real challenge for the regular classroom teacher to differentiate using the suggested strategies. One solution would be to reexamine the idea of the gifted specialist who in a collaborative mode could assist the regular classroom teacher in assessing the gifted student’s interests, learning preferences, and skill level and then help in the planning and development of lessons with depth and complexity. However, one danger is if there aren’t a sufficient number of gifted students in a given regular class, gifted students will once again become “lonely learners” with their social and emotional needs ignored. What is needed is a belief system and school culture that supports the development of the individual student’s giftedness because the regular classroom teacher cannot go it alone with or without differentiation.

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